

CONFIDENTIAL

Notes on the Church and East Timor, Asia-Pacific region1. Australia

a. Australian Council of Churches. The ACC is involved in a three-sided dialogue on Indonesia-related issues. The other two participants are the Indonesian Council of Churches (PGI) and the Melanesian Council of Churches (MCC). The ACC is therefore reluctant to take or support any initiative or project which it feels may antagonise the PGI and set back the dialogue. Consequently, for example, there was no debate or resolution on East Timor at last year's ACC plenary assembly in Canberra, and the ACC has declined to endorse the European Churches position statement on East Timor. ACC delegates to the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) plenary assembly held in Seoul in mid-1985 supported the motion against debate on East Timor. Recent tripartite meetings have focussed on the Irian Jaya refugee problem. East Timor has not been discussed.

Sections of the ACC are critical of the ACC approach. For example, two Commissions within the Uniting Church, an ACC member Church, have recently completed preparation of a position document on East Timor and hope this will form the basis for renewed discussion on the Timor issue within ACC forums.

b. Australian Episcopal Conference. In July 1986, the Executive of the AEC rejected a proposal put by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) that the AEC invite Mgr Belo to visit Australia on the occasion of the Papal visit in November (1986). Grounds for the rejection were that there are 'conflicting reports on East Timor'. The AEC Executive also declined to allow CCJP to approach the Vatican to invite Mgr Belo. Jose Ramos Horta recently criticised the AEC for its silence claiming, correctly, that 'I haven't heard from a single Australian Catholic Bishop expressing concern'. (Age, 31 January 1987). CCJP, an episcopal agency, is a notable exception having debated and endorsed the European Churches position statement and taken other initiatives on the issue.

c. Church community. Numerous Christian individuals, organisations and some Church media outlets remain concerned and responsive to initiatives with the Christians in Solidarity with East Timor Committee playing the leading catalyst role.

2. South Pacific

The following Church entities in the South Pacific region receive and distribute information on East Timor in their respective countries:

- * CCJP in Papua New Guinea.
- * Solomon Islands Christian Association.
- * Christian Council of Vanuatu.
- * Pacific Conference of Churches secretariat in Fiji.
- * Pacific Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and Development in Fiji.

The Pacific Conference of Churches adopted a positive resolution on East Timor at its September 1986 plenary in Western Samoa. A Sydney East Timorese participated as an observer.

The New Zealand CCJPD is also very supportive.

3. South-East Asia

a. Indonesia.

Catholic: aid officials of the Indonesian Bishops Conference continue to visit East Timor regularly and remain concerned at the general situation particularly continued military conflict and the overwhelming Indonesianisation of the territory and concomitant marginalisation of Timorese in all sections of the society. A increasing number of Indonesian Catholic church personnel are working in East Timor.

A new 'Ambassador' has replaced Mgr Pablo Puente as Papal Pro-Nuncio in Jakarta but nothing is known of his attitudes.

Protestant: the PGI continues its steadfast pro-Government policy on East Timor as evidenced by the extremely negative reaction to Fr Francisco Fernandes' presence at the CCA Assembly in Seoul, mid 1985. Since then the PGI has continued its criticism of progressive trends within the CCA. However there are elements within the PGI who are sympathetic at least on human rights matters; a small group of PGI related Christians regularly visit Timorese political prisoners in Cipinang prison in Jakarta.

b. Hong Kong. The establishment of an East Timor documentation centre in Hong Kong to service the Asian Church is a welcome development. Financial and documentation support comes from Australia. The Asia Partnership for Human Development (APHD) Secretariat, now located in Hong Kong, continues its financial support for East Timor projects.

c. Philippines. Catholic and Protestant organisations in the Philippines receive information on East Timor. In view of the change of Government and consolidation of the Aquino Presidency, an attempt will be made this year to have Philippines church and other bodies to sponsor a national visit by Timorese spokespersons with a view to enlisting public and Government support and breaching ASEAN solidarity on the issue.

d. Japan. The successful visit of Mimi Fereira and Mgr Lopes to Japan late last year is evidence of the small, but growing and well organised support within Japan, including Churches.

4. Conclusion

It would appear the time is right to organise a regional Christian consultation on East Timor bringing together for the first time key Church people concerned with the issue in the Asia-Pacific region, possibly later this year. Consideration is being given to such a proposal. It would be helpful if the report of the Geneva consultation were distributed to regional Churches. The ACFOA office is available to assist with this.